

Jai Alai:

The Fastest Game in the World

Can you imagine a game that is rougher than football and faster than basketball or hockey? **Jai alai** (HIGH-lie) is such a game! Jai alai, which means “merry festival,” was created hundreds of years ago by the Basques people who live in northern Spain. The Basques people named the game jai alai because they played the fast-paced game at festivals and celebrations. Today, it is the national sport of the Basque people in Spain.

History of Jai Alai

Jai alai probably started when the Romans brought an ancient Greek handball game to the Basque region. The Basques changed the Greek version of the sport by speeding up

the game and perfecting the equipment. They also created rules for the sport that have not changed since the 1500s.

The Equipment and Court

Jai alai was played by hitting a hard ball with the hand against a wall. The Basques found that the walls could not stand up to the constant pummeling by these balls, called **pelotas**, so they developed jai alai courts called **frontons**. The ten-foot front walls were made of granite blocks. Side and back walls added later helped keep the *pelotas* on the court. A large net on the side of the court protected spectators. Modern jai alai courts are still constructed like this.

The Basques also changed the equipment used in jai alai because of the pain caused by catching and hitting such hard balls. *Pelotas* resemble baseballs but are only about two inches in diameter. They are made by covering a hard core of rubber with linen thread and two layers of goatskin. Have you ever been stung by catching a fastball without



